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Written statement* submitted by the Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain Inc, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Saudi Arabia's Ongoing Targeting of Women's Rights Defenders

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) welcomes this opportunity at the 39th Session of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) to raise serious concerns about Saudi Arabia's arrests of women's rights defenders and activists. Over the past several months, Saudi authorities have arrested over a dozen activists and women's rights defenders in a coordinated campaign to target dissidents and suppress criticism. Among those officials have arrested are Samar Badawi, Naseema Alsada, Loujain al-Hathloul, Dr. Hatoon al-Fassi, Dr. Aziza al-Yousef, and Dr. Iman al-Nafjan, as well as Mohammed al-Bajadi, Omar al-Said, and Ibrahim al-Modeimigh.

Continued deterioration of women's rights and the silencing of activists in Saudi Arabia

In September 2017, the Government of Saudi Arabia announced it would lift its ban on women driving. The decision represented a watershed moment in the fight for gender equality in the kingdom, although the government did not commit to addressing structural concerns about the persistence of the ubiquitous system of male guardianship over women. In June 2018, the government officially lifted the ban, allowing women to drive without requiring they secure consent from their male guardian. The move was widely heralded although it did not affect broader gender equality concerns, particularly surrounding male guardianship.

Even as the government lifted the ban, officials warned women's rights activists against making public statements. Security forces also embarked on a coordinated campaign targeting the very women who had been so vocal in the struggle for women's rights over the years. The systematic targeting of women's rights defenders and activists signals the government's intent to continue to silence dissenting voices. Indeed, in the days before the government officially ended the driving ban, officials arrested a dozen women's rights defenders and rights activists. Since then, officials have continued to target women's rights activists.

The targeting of Samar Badawi and Naseema Alsada

Among the women's rights defenders arrested are Samar Badawi and Naseema Alsada who were arrested on 30 July for their outspoken advocacy advancing for women's rights in Saudi Arabia.[1] The driving force behind their arrests is the Presidency of State Security (PSS), a security and intelligence body formed by royal decree in July 2017. The decree de-fanged the Ministry of Interior, previously the government body in charge of domestic security and countering terrorism and responsible for the majority of domestic rights abuses, from arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance to torture and extrajudicial killings – these responsibilities have been transferred to the PSS. The decree empowers the PSS to "focus on the security of the nations, citizens and expatriates and counter terrorism, spying and ideological invasions of any kinds." The PSS' mandate to pursue terrorists and prosecute terror crimes was strengthened in the November 2017 Law on Terrorism and Its Financing, which grants the PSS extensive powers.

Badawi's advocacy work goes as far back as 2010, when she filed a lawsuit against the government challenging the male guardianship system over women, especially in circumstances concerning marriage. She has since become a leading figure of the women's rights movement in Saudi Arabia, championing the fight against the male guardianship system and pressing for gender equality for Saudi women. Badawi's work earned her international renown, and the United States Department of State honored her with the International Woman of Courage Award in 2012. She also spoke at the 27th session of the UN HRC in September 2014, participating in a panel on women's rights in Saudi Arabia and delivering an oral intervention in front of the Council. In her remarks, she highlighted human rights violations in Saudi Arabia by the Saudi government. She also called for the release of her then-husband and prominent human rights defender Waleed Abu al-Khair (who was also her lawyer in her 2010 lawsuit) and all other political prisoners.

After returning from Geneva, Badawi attempted to travel in December 2014 to Brussels to participate in the 16th EU-NGO Human Rights Forum. However, she discovered she was banned from traveling. She has since been unable to leave the country. Then two years later, in 2016, officials detained her with her two-year old daughter for opposing restrictions on women's healthcare and travel. In 2017, she was again intimidated and harassed, when authorities summoned her for questioning without giving her a reason. She was held briefly before being released.[2]

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[1] "ADHRB and ESOHR Condemn Saudi Arabia's Arrest of Samar Badawi and Naseema Alsada," ADHRB, 1 August 2018, https://www.adhrb.org/2018/08/adhrb-and-esohr-condemn-saudi-arabias-arrest-of-samar-badawi-and-naseema-alsada/.

[2] Ibid.

Alsada, like Badawi, has also been targeted by the government because of her activism. Alsada has been a strong voice in the fight for human rights and women's right to drive in the kingdom, previously advocating for protestors around the country who had been arrested by Saudi authorities, while also training human rights activists. As a result of her activities, she is among the most prominent women activists in Saudi Arabia. But her fight for gender equality also attracted the attention of the Saudi authorities, who have interrogated and intimidated her, warning her about her advocacy efforts and removing her name from the ballot when she ran in the elections for a seat on the municipal council in 2015.

A broader trend in suppressing women's rights defenders

Badawi and Alsada's arrests are the most recent developments in broader efforts by the Saudi government to target women's rights defenders and silence dissent throughout the kingdom. In addition to arresting Badawi and Alsada, officials also arrested over a dozen prominent human rights defenders and women's rights activists.

In May and June 2018, the Saudi government arrested almost a dozen prominent women's rights activists – seven women and three men – including some of the kingdom's most notable advocates in the fight for gender equality.[3] Among them are Professors Aziza al-Yousef and Iman al-Nafjan, Loujain al-Hathloul, Aisha al-Mana, Madeha al-Ajroush, Hessa al-Sheikh, and Dr. Fatoon al-Hassi. Authorities also arrested Dr. Ibrahim al-Modeimigh, and members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) Mohammed al-Bajadi and Omar al-Said.

Due to the scope of the arrests, especially as they came around the time the government lifted the ban on women driving, in late June, nine UN Special Rapporteurs released a statement on the arrests in May. They called for the immediate release of the detainees noting the kingdom's contradicting messages about women's rights. They stated, "[i]n stark contrast with this celebrated moment of liberation for Saudi women, women's human rights defenders have been arrested and detained on a wide scale across the country, which is truly worrying and perhaps a better indication of the Government's approach to women's human rights. We call for the urgent release of all those detained while pursuing their legitimate activities in the promotion and protection of women's rights in Saudi Arabia."[4]

They highlighted that the very same women who had actively fought for the right to drive were now finding themselves imprisoned for their advocacy. While some of the activists from the May arrests have been released, the recent arrests of Samar Badawi and Naseema Alsada in July further demonstrates the government's ongoing intent to silence the kingdom's activists and dissenting voices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The arrests of women's rights activists Samar Badawi and Naseem Alsada are the most recent developments in the Saudi government's ongoing mission to silence peaceful dissidents. The targeting of these two women is indicative of a larger trend that began in late May, with the arbitrary arrests of almost a dozen women's rights defenders around the time the Saudi government lifted the women's driving ban. Despite women's new right to drive, Saudi policy is in direct contradiction with the actions taken by Saudi authorities to intimidate, harass, and detain women's rights activists.

ADHRB calls on the Government of Saudi Arabia to:

- Immediately release all detained women's rights activists, including Samar Badawi and Naseema Alsada and drop all charges against them;
- Release all human rights defenders and political activists currently detained in the kingdom and drop all charges against them;
- Cease the harassment of peaceful critics and enshrine the right to peaceful assembly, association, and expression in domestic law; and
- Abolish the male guardianship system.

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3 "Saudi Arabia arrests 10 for their work promoting women's rights," ADHRB, 24 May 2018, https://www.adhrb.org/2018/05/saudi-arabia-arrests-10-for-their-work-promoting-womens-rights/.

4 "Saudi Arabia must immediately free women human rights defenders held in crackdown, say UN experts," UN OHCHR, 27 June 2018, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23270&LangID=E.